Little Words

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Introduction

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“LITTLE WORDS”—items such as clitics, pronouns, determiners, conjunctions, discourse particles, auxiliary/light verbs, prepositions, and so on—have been the focus of investigation in many research areas that include phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse function, historical development, variation, and acquisition. The unique purpose of GURT 2007 was to bring these different research areas into one professional conference that would promote discussion, both cross-disciplinary and within a single discipline, during the course of the event. To reflect the broad disciplinary scope of GURT 2007, Little Words: Their History, Phonology, Syntax, Semantics, Pragmatics, and Acquisition is divided into six parts that address each of these research areas.

Part I: History

In chapter 2 Łazorczyk and Pancheva make the novel observation that Old Church Slavonic (OCS) *oba*, the historical counterpart of the modern Slavic “both,” was not a distributive quantifier (like Modern Slavic and English “both”) but simply a numeral “two,” although it differed from another numeral *dva* “two” in that it was associated with a definiteness presupposition. They propose an account of the syntactic and semantic reanalysis of *oba* where it changes from a numeral, merged as a specifier of number phrase inside a [+] definite-marked determiner phrase (DP), to a quantifier merged as a specifier of a functional projection higher than the DP, headed by a null distributive operator. In this chapter they discuss the motivation for this historical change and the larger implications of their findings.

Elsman and Holt discuss in chapter 3 the phenomenon of the grammaticalization of lexical words into function words that has received much attention in various fields of linguistics. They point out that while grammaticalization usually results in the phonological reduction of the words in question, this reduction does not usually result in the loss of semantic recoverability. However, given that function words are inherently phonologically short, any reduction resulting from grammaticalization would incur a proportionally greater loss to the surface realization of their meaning. To support this phenomenon, they provide a close analysis of data from Medieval Leonese, which suggests that as function words are grammaticalized and undergo phonological reduction, individual features take on a correspondingly greater role in
distinguishing meaning that was previously represented by entire segments. In this chapter, the authors show how the burden of morphological representation shifts from the segmental to the featural level to prevent the complete loss of surface forms that are already short.

Part II: Phonology
In chapter 4 Lord, Berdan, and Fender analyze the prosodic differences between function words and content words in English. Adults reading aloud showed reduced stress on function words, as measured by acoustic correlates including length, intensity, pitch, and vowel quality. Compared with proficient readers, nonproficient children showed less distinction between function words and content words. This difference appears to be a major contributor to the impression of word-by-word nonfluent reading. Fluent readers look ahead in the text in order to construct appropriate phrasal word groups and assign prosodic contours. In contrast, many of the nonfluent readers are looking only as far as the next word; their cognitive resources are focused on next-word recognition, and there are too few words in the look-ahead queue to assign phrasal groupings. The authors suggest that acoustic analysis and eye tracking can contribute to our understanding of the development of reading fluency.

Rochman addresses the motivation for using floating quantifiers in chapter 5. In contrast to other research on floating quantifiers that focuses on the syntax of how the quantifier comes to occur in the position it does, she looks at why speakers opt to use the floated word order. Rochman shows that floating quantifiers are used preceding foci, a type of focus marker. Interpretively, the floating quantifiers result in a contrastive interpretation of the focus (producing a contrastive focus). She then briefly discusses how the floating quantifier comes to occur in the position that it does in the linear string and concludes with a possible phonological account for why in natural speech floating quantifiers only occur in one of the several possible positions.

Part III: Syntax
In chapter 6 Sáez discusses how third-person accusative clitics of Spanish verbs like ayudar trigger me-lui constraint effects. Because they are accusative (not dative) and third-person (not first-/second-person) clitics, their offending status escapes standard formulations of such constraint, including Ormazábal and Romero’s (1998a, 1998b) one. Sáez proposes that those accusative clitics can find easy accommodation if they are actually generated in the specifier of an applicative phrase (as goals). He provides several pieces of evidence to support his claim: impossibility of a dative clitic, inherent interpretation for adverbs like mucho, and unavailability of depictives. The complement of the applicative phrase (the theme) is a cognate object undergoing conflation, and its covertness explains the goal accusative makeup as resulting from a case assignment principle (a variant of the one in Alsina [1997]). Finally, adopting Ormazábal and Romero’s (2007) approach to me-lui constraint effects, he proposes that they are triggered in these cases not by the clitic itself (a determiner undergoing cliticization) but by the (silent) applicative object agreement.

Gergel analyzes in chapter 7 the Romanian little word de as it occurs with adjectives. The claim is that the word under scrutiny serves as an exponent in degree con-
structions. He discusses the pertinent morphosyntactic properties found in the language together with the paradox arising from a positive setting for degrees as far as the basic morphological and syntactic facts of the language are concerned, on the one hand, and some apparent negative tests (e.g., in questions and subcomparatives), on the other. To resolve this paradox, Gergel proposes that *de* is inserted in the relevant degree constructions under a functional degree—and in general also movement-sensitive head. In addition the chapter analyzes new evidence from an independent domain involving the little word *de*, namely as it is attested in (adjectival) doubling constructions.

In chapter 8 Taylor discusses comparative correlatives in English that consist of two clauses, both of which obligatorily begin with the word *the*. She points out that if this *the* is analyzed as a determiner, it must be concluded that the expressions consist of two DPs, perhaps similar to an equative expression. However, Taylor states that there is evidence against such an equative-like analysis—the verb in the second clause is the main verb, contrasting with the verb in the first clause, which never shows these properties. In order to account for these facts, Taylor proposes that the obligatory *the* at the start of both clauses be treated as a complementizer (C0), the head of its clause. This analysis of *the* is extended to another English expression, nominal extraposition.

Progovac’s goal in chapter 9 is to provide a theoretical argument, using the tools of the syntactic framework of minimalism (e.g., Chomsky 1995), that certain small clauses (syntactic objects with no or few little words), which can be found in root contexts as well as in other unexpected uses, may represent “living fossils” from a root small-clause stage in language evolution. In addition to the root small-clause stage, the clausal development may have also gone through a proto-coordination stage, on its way to developing specific functional categories. According to Progovac, these claims are consistent (a) with a syntactic analysis of what counts as an increase in complexity, (b) with well-known grammaticalization processes, (c) with “living fossil” evidence, and (d) with stages in language acquisition. Progovac argues that not only does this approach help situate syntax in an evolutionary framework, but it also sheds light on some crucial aspects of syntax itself.

In chapter 10 Velázquez-Mendoza and Aranovich analyze the distribution of Spanish personal *a* in ditransitives. They observe that the kind of direct objects that are normally marked by personal *a* in monotransitives (human, definite) occur without *a* in ditransitives. To account for this, they suggest that personal *a* cannot occur on secondary objects. These are defined as the direct object of a ditransitive in which the goal immediately follows the verb. A consequence of their analysis is that in ditransitives with pronominal themes the only possible word order is V-Theme-Goal, because object pronouns must be marked by personal *a*. Their analysis receives further support from evidence based on relativization of Spanish ditransitives. The conclusion of their study is that little word *a* reveals that Spanish is in the process of becoming, or has already become, a primary object/secondary object (PO/SO) language.

Part IV: Semantics

In chapter 11 Beavers examines the role of adposition semantics in the realization of oblique arguments. Contra recent approaches in which either the verb or the adposition carries the core predicational force of a clause and thus solely determines how
arguments within the clause are realized, Beavers suggests that both verbs and adpositions assign thematic roles to oblique arguments, albeit subject to a compatibility constraint: the role assigned by the verb must crucially subsume the role assigned by the adposition. He then shows how various typological parameters (including motion encoding and the presence of dative shift) can be reduced on this approach to cross-linguistic variation in adposition inventories. Finally, Beavers reexamines the notion of semantically vacuous “default” adpositions and suggests that such adpositions do not exist, further supporting the idea that argument-marking adpositions are semantically contentful.

In chapter 12 Thomas and Michaelis argue that Krifka’s (1998) path-based analysis of temporal measure adverbials can be extended to aspectual adverbials that denote time points, in particular by temporal adverbials (e.g., That should happen by today). Using data from the Wall Street Journal corpus they demonstrate that by temporal adverbials presuppose a path schema that, subject to the demands of context, might represent a schedule or a process. In all contexts, they claim, the by adverbial denotes the first point at which some observer—whether the author or a participant—got, expects to get, or hopes to get a positive answer to the question “Is state x in force?” In some contexts, they argue, this sampling point represents an earlier than expected point of eventuation (as in, e.g., By 8 a.m. [the traffic] already had thinned out), in others it represents a deadline (as in, e.g., Mr. Bush has called for an agreement by next September at the latest), and in still others it simply represents the first point at which the relevant state is evident (as in, e.g., U.S. oil supplies [. . .] had peaked in 1970 and 1971 and by 1973 were declining). Because the sampling-point schema is compatible with a number of more specific ones, they suggest that the by temporal adverbial is a contextual operator in the sense of Kay (1990): It instructs the interpreter to retrieve an appropriate semantic frame and place the situation denoted by the predication into that frame.

Park’s main goal in chapter 13 is to provide the generalized patterns of interpretations of distributivity, which are drawn from the non-nominal plural marker (NNM) –tul and its interactions with different types of predicates. In particular, Park shows that there are two distinct types of distributive effects, an argument and an event distributive reading, and that only the latter is due to the presence of the NNM plural marker –tul, while the former is due to the distributive operator introduced by a plural subject. In order to explain the generalized patterns, Park proposes the eclectic approach under the neo-Davidsonian event semantics, which combines both the syntactic agreement approach and the semantic approach.

Part V: Pragmatics

In chapter 14 Pellet examines the use of French discourse markers (DMs) donc and alors (both equivalent to English “so”) in native speaker conversational discourse to argue that the two DMs are not functionally equivalent: donc and alors occur in complementary distribution. Donc asserts the validity of the speaker’s viewpoint and occurs within turn, whereas alors is used to preface a reaction to just-heard information and occurs at the beginning of a turn. A discourse analysis of the occurrences of these markers demonstrates that there is no functional overlap between the two. Pellet con-
cludes with a justification of exclusive uses of the two markers (instances where only one marker is possible) with what each of them indexes respectively ([logical] continuity for *donc*, change of orientation for *alors*), hence reinforcing the argument that they are not functional equivalents. She ends with a discussion of the possible compound *alors donc* and the unacceptability of *donc alors*.

Alba-Juez reports in chapter 15 on the qualitative and quantitative results of her analysis of the little words *macho/a* and *tío/a* in Spanish and *man* in English. Following Fraser’s (1996, 2006) taxonomy, she categorizes these expressions as parallel pragmatic markers that appear in the form of vocatives and are characteristic of oral, colloquial language, mainly found in the corpora used within the framework of the so-called small talk. She analyzes the strategies used by “small talkers” when employing these markers, as well as the main discourse functions they fulfil, namely their function as markers of (im)politeness, interaction regulators, and as alerters (focusing function). Alba comments on the issues of solidarity and gender with respect to these little words and especially about the uses of the Spanish marker *macha*.

Biesenbach-Lucas, in chapter 16, examines the impact of faculty’s higher status and relative social distance on the use of greetings and closings in student–professor e-mail communication. She conducts an analysis of linguistic realizations of greetings and closings, examines closings for sequenced moves, and compares the linguistic patterns and moves used by native and nonnative speakers of English. Her findings indicate that two distinct e-mail formats set native speakers (NSs) apart from non-native speakers (NNSs): unlike NNSs, NSs produce brief openings and closings that are nevertheless appropriately status congruent given the faculty addressee. In contrast, NNSs inappropriately blend formal business letter formulae with informal, often oral, expressions. Biesenbach-Lucas’s study suggests that e-mail from students to professors in an academic context is developing toward brevity and ritual formulae that differ from conventional business letters but adhere to status-appropriate social protocol.

Part VI: Acquisition

In chapter 17, Bowles and Montrul investigate the efficacy of form-focused instruction involving explicit rule presentation and practice with explicit corrective feedback. Specifically their instruction focuses on intermediate-level second-language (L2) learners of Spanish and differential object marking in Spanish. Results show positive effects for the instruction, with significant improvements in the learners’ ability to distinguish between grammatical and ungrammatical uses of the target structure (as measured by a grammaticality judgment test) and increased ability to produce the target structure in obligatory contexts (as measured by a controlled written production test). Results provide support for Schwartz and Sprouse’s (1996) claim that learners can overcome the structure imposed by their first language (L1) and restructure their interlanguages accordingly. The authors present implications for future research and pedagogy.

In chapter 18 de la Fuente addresses the field of instructed discourse language development of advanced L2 learners. In particular, her study examines the effect of type of focus on form task (explicit, i.e., consciousness-raising [C-R] vs. implicit, i.e., input enrichment that is meaning [content] focused) on the acquisition of discourse markers, and some of the processes that take place when students orally produce the
language in these pedagogical tasks. Participants were twenty-four adult college learners of Spanish randomly assigned to pairs in one of the two experimental conditions. The quantitative analyses reveal that the C-R task was more effective at promoting attention to and noticing of discourse markers, as shown by the higher levels of both comprehension (meaning, function) and production (form) of the items. This superior performance is supported by the results of the qualitative analyses: They reveal that although input enrichment tasks seem to promote some level of effective attention to and noticing of discourse markers in the L2 input, C-R tasks seem more effective by focusing learners’ attention on their forms, meanings, and uses and consequently raising learners’ awareness of such forms. In addition, during C-R tasks, learners negotiate meaning of L2 forms by formulating hypotheses and testing them. De la Fuente concludes that, given the lack of salience of L2 discourse markers, explicit learning (via C-R tasks) and metalinguistic awareness may be necessary cognitive steps to learn such linguistic items in the input.

Kupisch et al. discuss in chapter 19 different approaches to the omission of articles in early child speech: the nominal mapping parameter and prosodic accounts. She analyzes data from the four Germanic languages—English, German, Norwegian, and Swedish—showing that children acquiring the Scandinavian languages omit fewer articles in obligatory contexts than mean length of utterances (MLU)-matched children acquiring English or German. Kupisch and colleagues conclude that the nominal mapping parameter does not predict these results while they can be accommodated in prosodic models of article omission.

In chapter 20 Dye investigates the status of functional elements in first language acquisition by focusing on the status of auxiliaries in child French. Based on analyses of a new child French corpus including cross-sectional speech samples from eighteen normally developing monolingual children (ages 1;11–2;11), which reveal a continuum in the surface realization of auxiliary forms, Dye argues that early productions are not as impoverished as typically assumed and that children may have greater grammatical knowledge than previously thought.

References